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ABSTRACT

Eighty-four students in a graduate course on methods and materials for reading in the elementary school participated in a study of the effects of black dialect syntactical features on teacher judgements of reader ability. Each person listened to four tape recordings of the same 255-word passage. The recordings varied by race of reader, number of meaning-changing and non-meaning-changing miscues, and whether non-meaning-changing miscues were dialect-based. Regardless of race and teaching experience, subjects judged that black readers who exhibited non-meaning-changing black dialect deviations from the text were less able than their Standard English counterpart. The results are interpreted as indicating that black dialect does influence teacher diagnosis of reading ability.
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Teacher Judgements of the Ability of Readers with
Different Speech Patterns

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Running head: Teacher judgements

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The purpose of the present study was to determine whether or not the presence of Black Dialect syntactic features in the speech of readers in an oral reading situation affects teacher perception of a reader's reading ability. Specifically, do teachers consider readers who produce Black Dialect based non-meaning changing miscues as less able readers than their Standard English speaking counterparts? If so, is this equally true for good and poor readers?

Previous research findings suggest that teachers consider the speakers of non-standard dialects to be less adequate in their speech than speakers of Standard English (Naremore, 1971; Whitehead and Miller, 1972; Williams, Whitehead and Miller, 1971; Granger, Quay, Mathews and Verner, 1977). There are few data available to address the question of the relationship between presence of a non-standard dialect and differential treatment of the speaker of that dialect by a teacher.

Some studies suggest that there is a relationship between the dialect of a speaker and responses toward that speaker. Gess (1969) and Steadman and Adams (1973) have found strong relationships between speech and ratings of student behavior. Holmes (1968), Guskin (1970), Crowl and MacGinitie (1966) and Covington (1972) have found relationships between ratings of speech and predictions of academic test scores, intelligence, and academic readiness. Across these studies, the more non-standard the speech, the more likely a student was predicted to have problems. While the findings of these studies are uniform, the findings are descriptive and do not permit causal interpretations of the impact of students' speech on teacher behavior toward students.

A potential cause of the reading failure of non-standard speaking children is a tendency of teachers to force word-for-word accuracy in oral reading, rather than viewing reading as a meaning getting process (Goodman and Buck, 1973; Cunningham, 1975). The latter conception of reading requires teachers to distinguish between meaning versus non-meaning changing miscues or deviation from text. The distinction is important since Goodman and Sims (1974) report that "Black Dialect speakers frequently read Standard English structures orally as Black Dialect structures" and that "changes made by the subjects were surface changes (and) retained the meaning of the original structures." (Goodman and Sims, 1974, p. 8).

The research on reading, coupled with the correlational studies of the relationship between ratings of non-standard speech and other characteristics, suggests that reading is an important context within which to assess the causal effects of non-standard speech on teacher behavior.

Method

The subjects were 84 students enrolled in three different sections of a graduate course on methods and materials for reading in the elementary school. The sample contained 68 whites, 15 blacks and one Asian student. There were four males and 80 females. Seventy-four of the subjects were teaching or had taught, with a mean teaching experience of 4.7 years. Of the teachers, 48 had been, or were currently, directly responsible for teaching reading.

The task for all the subjects was the same. On the first day of class, each subject listened to a tape recording of four female "children" reading the same 255-word selection. After hearing each reader, the subject completed a 10-item, five-point bi-polar scale to rate the reader.

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Examples of dimensions on the scale are: the reader: uses proper phrasing.... does not use proper phrasing; is confident ... is unsure; seems to read with meaning ... is a word caller. After a subject heard all four readers, (s)he was asked to rank order the four readers, with the best reader ranked first, and the poorest reader ranked fourth.

Beyond these task instructions, the following scenario was established: subjects were told that the investigators were interested in exploring the factors that shape a person's diagnosis of a reader, and that by listening to tapes of readers, we were approximating a typical first step in classroom reading evaluation. Each subject was given four copies of the original story text and was told that (s)he would hear four children, each reading the material. Subjects were told to make whatever notes they felt necessary on the copies in order to rate and rank the readers.

Using a story by Clark (1966) the investigators constructed four variations of the text, each reflecting a different type of reader: Standard English good reader (SEGR), Black Dialect good reader (BDGR), Standard English poor reader (SEPR), and Black Dialect poor reader (BDPR). Each variation of the text contained fifteen changes from the original but following the distinction between meaning-changing miscues (MCM) and non-meaning-changing miscues (NMCM), good reader versions (SEGR and BDGR) and poor reader versions were prepared. SEGR and BDGR versions contained five MCM and ten NMCM while the poor reader versions (SEPR and BDPR) contained ten MCM and five NMCM. Of the NMCM, all versions shared five (e.g., She did a kind of backward loop. No earthbound canary could have done it. → She did a kind of backward loop that no earthbound canary could have.), with the second five for SEGR typical of a Standard English speaking

good reader's miscues (e.g., ...thought it came over the radio → thought it came from the radio) and the second five for BDGR indicative of Black Dialect syntactic features (e.g., We had just never had any pets. → We had just never had no pets.). Of the MCM, all versions again shared five (e.g., She was a small yellow canary. → She was a small yellow cannery...) with the second five MCM for SEPR and BDPR typical of poor readers miscues (e.g., I heard a musical whistle. → I had a musical whistle...). The five meaning-changing-miscues that were particular to the poor readers occurred on the same line of text as the non-meaning changing miscues particular to the good readers. Thus, the location of miscues was consistent across all versions.

Three "readings" of each version were then audio recorded by adult females--three Standard English speakers and three Black Dialect speakers. Each of these six adult females read both a good reader version and a poor reader version of the text. Three sets of four readings were then created with each reader type present in each set, and with order within a set randomized. No good reader and poor reader version as recorded by the same adult female was present in the same set, and each reading from a particular adult only appeared once in the three sets. The 84 subjects were stratified by race and then randomly assigned by strata to listen to one of the three sets. Thus, no subject listened to a good reader version and poor reader version as read by the same adult.

Results

Each subject completed a ten-item rating scale for each taped voice. The responses on the ten-item scale from each subject for each tape were summated, creating for each subject four scores, a summated rating of the

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SEGR, SEPR, BDGR, and BDPR readers. In addition, each subject rank ordered the four readers (s)he heard. Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations of the summated rating scores and the ranking scores for all subjects for the four reader types.

Insert Table 1 about here

Rating and ranking scores were analyzed separately. Rating and ranking scores represent repeated measures on subjects and as such are correlated data. Both the rating data and the ranking data were analyzed using a non-parametric Friedman ANOVA (see Sigel, 1956). Significant differences were obtained between readers for both the ratings $\chi^2 (3) = 57.44, p < .05$, and the rankings, $\chi^2 (3) = 58.76, p < .05$. Post hoc comparisons of both the ratings and rankings by means of a non-parametric confidence interval procedure (Rosenthal and Ferguson, 1965) indicated similar patterns in the rating and ranking data. The SEPR and BDPR readers were not ranked differently from each other. However, the SEGR and BDGR readers were rated and ranked differently with the SEGR reader evaluated more positively in both instances.

A two-by-two multivariate analysis of variance was also done with the dependent variables being the four summated ratings of the four readers, and the independent variables being race of subject (Black vs. White) and whether or not a person had taught reading. No significant differences in rating behavior were found due to either of these factors or their interaction.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study suggest that teachers may confuse oral language features of Black Dialect speaking readers with reading ability. Black Dialect non-meaning-changing syntactic features embedded in the oral reading of good readers appear to have been salient in teachers' judgements of these readers. Support for this conclusion is found in both the rating scale data and the ranking data where Black Dialect speaking good readers were rated and ranked significantly lower than their Standard English speaking counterparts. It is interesting that this finding did not hold for poor readers. One possible interpretation of these results relates to the different ratios of MCM to NMCM in the good versus poor reader tapes.

The poor reader tapes contained more meaning-changing miscues than did the good reader tapes. The dialect-based miscues may have only affected judgements when these miscues co-occurred with a relatively small number of meaning-changing miscues. When surrounded by a large number of meaning-changing miscues, the dialect-based miscues may be less obvious and their impact on judgements lessened.

These findings provide some empirical support for the hypothesis suggested by Goodman and Buck (1973) and Simons and Johnson (1974) that it is teacher response to language different children--not dialect difference per se--that may be related to many of these children's failure to learn to read. If teachers look for errors in the oral reading of children, and consider syntactic features of the oral language of non-standard speaking children as errors, then these non-standard speaking children may be judged as poor readers. The data from this study suggest this is so.

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As Goodman and Buck state, such a judgement may result in teachers moving children away from their linguistic competence by requiring word-for-word accuracy. Investigation of teacher behavior in oral reading lessons in situ is necessary to provide data that directly test this latter possibility.

There are several training implications suggested by these findings. First, if teacher judgements about the reading abilities on non-standard speaking children are a result of lack of knowledge of the features of non-standard dialects, then teacher education must provide such information. Protocol materials by Love (1973) have been helpful in promoting such knowledge (Ramig, Granger and Neel, 1976).

However, if judgements about the reading ability of non-standard speaking students are a result of generalized stereotypic response to speakers of non-standard dialects, then perhaps knowledge of the features of non-standard dialects is not sufficient. Techniques for modifying such stereotypic expectations have been discussed by Billiard, Elifson and Rubadeau (1976).

Finally, if subjects' responses to the oral reading of children result from an attitude that only word-for-word precision is good reading, then study of psycholinguistic conceptualizations of the reading process is probably appropriate.

Given appropriate learning, teachers may be able to distinguish reading ability for related but non-essential factors.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations: Rating and Ranking Scores

	1. Ratings		2. Rankings	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
Standard English Good Reader	32.85	9.56	1.71	.939
Black Dialect Good Reader	27.56	6.94	2.28	.989
Standard English Poor Reader	23.21	7.78	2.96	.884
Black Dialect Poor Reader	23.45	7.86	3.03	1.11

1. Rating scores could range from 10 to 50: summation of ten 5-point items (with 50 being the most positive and 10 the least positive).
2. Ranking scores range from 1 to 4 (with 1 being the most positive and 4 the least positive).

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